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ABSTRACT

Rapid social change with profound implications for the raising of children contributes significantly to the problems schools face, but it is also true that schools can exacerbate children's problems. Suggestions are made to improve education and to make schools places where children are helped to cope with stress. Current practices that might be modified include: (1) defining the role of schools in terms of academic instruction with education in the basic academic disciplines; (2) re-establishing the role of teacher as primary instructor; (3) restoring the teacher to the focal point of the classroom; (4) regularizing the school schedule to approximate a set routine; (5) trying direct instruction as the primary instructional technique; (6) addressing educational needs in terms of the developmental and cognitive level the child has attained; (7) relying primarily on whole-class instruction directed to the class average; (8) promoting the value of individual achievement with the child assuming personal responsibility for success or failure; (9) using grades and tests that realistically reflect actual student achievement; (10) building self-confidence through realistic academic achievement; (11) directing counseling toward students with problems rather than focusing on preventive programs for groups; (12) setting up and consistently enforcing a brief set of classroom rules; and (13) rather than establishing parent involvement programs, teachers should approach parents individually. (SLD)

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A Dozen (or so) Suggestions for School Reform

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With even a cursory look at the literature, one is astounded by the number of organizations, committees, task forces, as well as the proliferation of writing, position papers, and innumerable articles and books, all ostensibly aimed at something called "school reform". Like the elephant and the blind men of Indian myth, one can only conclude that school reform means different (and often *very* different) things to different people. The paper is based on the observations of a school psychologist, and the modest suggestions for school reform is made from that perspective.

There are many factors that contribute to the widespread underachievement that critics have called the "dumbing down" of our schoolchildren. It is true that in many schools social promotion has replaced competency based advancement, and students are graduating without the skills required of them. But it is unfair to blame the schools, as if they *alone* were responsible for this failure. Rapid social change with profound implications for the raising of children contributes significantly to the problem. Still, in many cases, the schools exacerbate the problems children face. Rather than serving to ameliorate the effects of rapid social change, or to remain benignly indifferent to those forces, today's schools have adopted practices that further contribute to the problem -- violating the physician's first rule: "do no harm".

Today's children come to school with problems that are markedly different from those of only a generation ago. Because school is such a large part of a child's life, the school experience is a highly significant factor in the child's life-stress situation. Unfortunately, many of the current practices in the school, far from helping children to cope, actually serve to intensify the stress. These suggestions speak to the "fit" of child with school, as seen in the context of childhood stress and children's emotional well-being. The general goal is to create schools as places that *helps* children cope with stress, by identifying some current practices that might be modified.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

01. Role of the Schools
Instead of trying to help in various health, psychological, and social problems (such as violence, teenaged pregnancy, youth suicide, prejudice, poverty, drug abuse, AIDS)....
try focusing on *academic* instruction.
Why? The primary purpose of the schools is to provide education in the basic academic disciplines. Programs which do not contribute towards that educational mission (even if well-meaning), are a distraction. They rob students of instructional time, divert attention, money, and others resource, and limit the ability of teachers and administrators to remain focused on their primary mission. Social, health and psychological programs are best left to agencies established to deal with those issues.

02. The Teacher's Role
Instead of teacher as facilitator, coordinator, manager, counselor, and/or resource person....
try to re-establish the role of teacher as *teacher*, that is, as primary instructor.
Why? Instead of reducing the teacher's status to, at best, another bureaucrat, or at worst a peer of the students, this restores the teacher to his or her traditional role as someone who has knowledge to impart. This increases the teacher's prestige and thus authority, and helps to assure the students' attention and respect because of the unique role the teacher plays.

03. The Classroom
Instead of open classrooms, or those which try to be student-centered....
try restoring the teacher to the focal point in the front and center of the room. Assure that eye contact with the children is easy and natural.
Why? This helps children with attentional problems. Moreover, carefully consider seating to reduce distractions and the opportunity for social interactions. The classroom should be a quiet, safe, and orderly place to learn.

04. Scheduling
Instead of introducing flexible scheduling arrangements designed to "individualize instruction", juggling instructional time with the needs of various special services pull-out or in-class programs....
try to regularize the schedule to approximate a set routine.
Why? This provides the child with additional structure, predictability and security. If the classroom is a constantly changing kaleidoscope of adults and children grouping and re-grouping in various configurations with attendant noise and confusion, the effects on children will be to overstimulate them and increase free-floating anxiety.

05. Learning
Instead of relying primarily on "exploratory" learning, discussion, or peer tutoring -- techniques which are child-centered....
try direct instruction as the *primary* instructional technique.
Why? This has the advantage of being efficient in terms of time and effort, provides a teleological component often missing from unstructured and serendipitous learning, correctly directs students who may be developmentally ill-equipped to learn progressively (beyond motor skills). It also has the advantage of reinforcing the notion of school as a special place different from home (where incidental learning dominates much of the child's life). Unlike home, school is a place where learning is formal, structured, and requires attention and concentrated effort.

06. Curriculum

Instead of trying to balance the curriculum between educational and developmental needs of children...
try addressing educational needs within the context of the developmental and cognitive level the child has attained as the determiners of readiness.

Why? The current emphasis on child development within the classroom is misplaced, and the case for "psychologizing" the curriculum is vastly overstated. Academic instruction must now share valuable curriculum time with issues that have questionable validity in their classroom application. It must be remembered that the primary responsibility for the child's developmental and emotional well-being is, and remains, the parents', not the schools'.

07. Grouping for Instruction

Instead of relying on grouping, especially heterogeneous grouping which forces all students to proceed at such a rate as to assure mastery by the least able student in the group...
try to rely *primarily* on whole class instruction directed to the class average. Grouping, when appropriate, should be homogeneous with children at similar ability levels grouped together so the instruction can be geared to the group average.

Why? Children who progress through new material with those with similar ability are likely to be challenged but not overwhelmed; nor are they likely to become bored with too slow a pace. Thus learning is maximized for all the children in the group.

08. Values

Instead of emphasizing learning as a cooperative enterprise, encouraging collective projects and downplaying grades and individual accomplishments in the interests of the collective...
try restoring the place of individual achievement with the child assuming personal responsibility for his or her success or failure.

Why ? restoring the place of individual achievement with reasonable competition and a striving for excellence with justifiable pride in accomplishment, can serve as powerful motivator for children -- a lesson for life as well as for school.

09. Evaluation

Instead of avoiding realistic grades or evaluative comments for fear of injuring the child's self-esteem...
try using grades and tests that realistically reflect actual student achievement.

Why:? his serves to clarify where the child stands academically and in terms of skills development. We all need to know "how am I doing?" Children often know when adults are not honest with them, and they are also quite capable of judging and comparing their progress with their peers. Evaluative systems which are dishonest encourage the child not to trust adults, and may give parents unrealistic expectation which can be deleterious for the child. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that such duplicity increases children's self-esteem. Finally, children can be shown progress when compared against *their own* previous levels of accomplishment, thus assuring justifiable pride in achievement.

10. Self Esteem

Instead of assuming that the school has a direct and active role to play in increasing children's self esteem...
try building self confidence through realistic academic achievement.

Why? Certainly self-confidence is a useful quality to develop, but making mistakes and seeing the consequences, or having them pointed out to you so you can correct them are natural and important components of learning. Linking self-confidence to real achievement helps students see the value of their hard work and efforts.

11. Counseling

Instead of focusing on preventative programs for groups...

try directing efforts towards individuals with problems that may be interfering with school functioning. The approach should be restorative vs. preventative, dealing with a problem after it has been clearly identified in terms of nature and severity.

Why? While the "preventative" approach has a certain intuitive appeal, the state of the art is such that a large proportion of errors can be made in identifying children "at risk". Well meaning intervention efforts can sometimes create or exacerbate problems. Rather consider that children are dynamic, growing and developing, so that behavioral changes should be expected. Intervention should be cautiously applied, and only when well-justified.

12. Discipline

Instead of relying on encouraging children to be good, or engaging in dialog over the meaning of transgressions, handling each incident on a case by case basis...

try setting up and consistently enforcing a brief set of classroom rules. The list should be short and simple with clear well-thought out consequences for infractions. Rules must be evenly applied; without prejudice, and with the possibility of a fresh start.

Why? Rules help to create a sense of structure for children. They introduce the notion of right and wrong. They emphasize the teacher as an authority figure. They remind children that actions have consequences, and that individuals must take personal responsibility for their actions.

13. Parent Involvement

Instead of establishing "parent involvement" programs...

try soliciting parent support for the teacher's efforts. Parents should be approached individually, by teachers, to see how they best help out in their child's education.

Why? The level of desirable parental involvement may vary substantially depending on a variety of factors. Parents quite often don't make the best tutors, and roles of home and school should not become blurred. Parents however, can be powerful forces for establishing and maintaining the teacher's authority, and should be used as allies in that effort.